The *Dyonisius-Rezeption* as a fertile fallacy caused by a paradox inherent within medieval epistemology

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1. Introduction

The *Corpus Areopagiticum* constitutes one of the most successful intellectual forgeries within Western history, it was believed to be authentic for almost thirteen centuries and among the most distinguished scholars, mystics, intellectuals, emperors, popes – the influence it exerted then it can hardly be quantified, it undeniably succeeded in shaping our world.

This prompts the question – how was this possible? How did an unknown person(s) by using a pseudonym manage to convince so many people, within an interval of so many centuries of a fallacy and as a consequence significantly influence them[2]? The phenomenon of the *Dionysius-Rezeption*[3] opens up many philosophical questions, such as is our reality real? Or we too nowadays believe some fallacy simply because it is validated by some figure of authority? As well as, does truth necessarily succeeds, or falsities may equally have enduring effects? Or also we may by considering the deception of Pseudo-Dionysius as a pious fraud ponder a Machiavellian issue whether it is permissible to lie if the intention is good.

This paper was conceived as an answer to the first question. How was it possible for a forgery to succeed within such a long time span? To explain it I analyzed medieval epistemology and uncovered an inherent paradox which allowed for forgeries to be spread, additionally I identified the corpus as a *fertile fallacy* by employing Soros framework (viz. the Human Uncertainty Principle) and finally explained its historical mechanism.

Structure of the paper. (§ Sec. 2) illustrates the paradox inherent in medieval epistemology; (§ Sec. 3) introduces the corpus and traces a brief history of its reception; (§ Sec. 4) introduces the Human Uncertainty Principle and the notion of fertile fallacy; (§ Sec. 5) applies the framework to explain the *Dionysius-Rezeption*.

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[2] If not outright manipulate them.
[3] That is the influence of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*.

2. The paradox inherent within medieval epistemology

The great part of philosophers in the Middle Ages were also theologians, believing that *divine revelation* constituted a source of certain knowledge (Copleston, 1952, p. 4); Christian philosophers in particular regarded *The Bible* (divinely revealed) and *The Tradition* (divinely inspired[4]) as premises to be accepted on the grounds of faith (Copleston, pp. 11-12); as a consequence the Scripture ($\aleph$) consisting of only absolutely true propositions, was the most authoritative source (Smits, 2013) with only the Tradition (ω) coming second to it (Hoenen, 2003, p. 157).

Therefore, epistemologically as the two sets $\aleph$ and ω were to be necessarily accepted by philosophers, we conclude (1) that medieval epistemology was inherently informed by these *authorities* [auctoritates][5] and (2) that the truth value of p was determined by how accurately it was judged to picture at least one of the two authorities ($\aleph \& \omega$), whose degree slightly diverged. This clearly generated what we may call (3) *the problem of exegesis* which constitutively affected every text and every communication – for we may claim that $\aleph$ pictures the full picture of the world, yet we cannot claim that S_H[6] can rationally[7] access the full picture of the world.

Subsequently, within this paradigm notwithstanding the postulation of certain knowledge, the element of human fallibility and specifically human language determined uncertainty and because there was no objective criterion to determine which S_H had the most accurate picture of $\aleph \& \omega$, this allowed great space for freedom and creativity[8][9] (Hoenen, 2003).

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[4] (Hoenen, 2003, p. 157)

[5] *Auctoritates* are "texts or extracts from texts conferring authority" (Smits).

[6] A human subject

[7] I had to specify it as indeed e.g. mystical visions can be understood as an extra-rational access to the full picture of the world.

[8] And even for arbitrariness and narcissistic self-promotion

[9] Can be then questioned the extent to which the Medieval societies were closed ones as Popper argued or static as other viz. historicists have asserted – as this clearly shows the inherent potential for change which constituted them.

To be sure, theology and philosophy were clearly distinguished notably by Thomas Aquinas (Copleston, 1952); yet the two blurred, as neither their object nor their result could differ (Copleston); additionally, as we have said most philosophers were theologians and the concept of theology was often confused with philosophical metaphysics. In fact, both philosophers and theologians when developing a theory had to always make sure it pictured an accurate picture of א&ω, independently from the means employed[10].

Consequently, philosopher *(Φ)* developing theory (*T*) had to always take into account *a priori* א&ω in order to explain phenomenon *(φ)*, if they wanted their arguments to be considered valid; if *T* developed by *Φ* contradicted $P \in$ א&ω, since $P \in$ א&ω held the truth value of 1, *T* was falsified on principle; this obtained necessarily also for each *T* coherently describing the world, as no inductive knowledge and arguably no human knowledge could reach the truth value of 1, everything outside א&ω not cohering to it was be necessarily refused.

I contend that this generated a *paradox* inherent in medieval epistemology which constituted its major weakness and eventually the cause of its demise, we will recall very briefly the controversy which sparked the paradigm-shift inaugurating the Scientific revolution. The *philosopher[11]* Copernicus after his death published T_H[12] which provoked massive scandal and debate, what distinguished T_H was that it explained *φ* while conflicting with $P \in$ א&ω, showing apparently that the current paradigm was an hindrance to the knowledge of the world[13]. Galilei understood what was at stake and tried to rescue א&ω by elaborating a theory of double truth but this dividing approach, similar in its mechanism with the processes of modernization e.g. secularization[14] in the long run undermined the authority and effective influence of א&ω.

But this constituted the first part of paradox. If from one side it falsified theories accurately picturing the world such as T_H, only because they contradicted $P \in$ א&ω – from the other it verified theories inaccurately picturing the world, only because they

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[10] Independently from the methodology both had to accurately picture א&ω, philosophers by accurately picture a world reflecting א&ω and theologians by accurately picture א&ω.
[11] The confines of this word at that time were often blurred (Merriam-Webster, 2025).
[12] The theory of heliocentrism
[13] Arguably a maladaptive behavior for a society.
[14] (Habermas, 1998)

didn't contradict $P \in \aleph\&\omega$. And since (3) inherent uncertainty could not provide for an objective criterion to discern the correct exegesis, even a false theory by simply leveraging the authority of $\aleph\&\omega$ could be verified[15].

As a matter of fact, the certain $\aleph\&\omega$ far from being a secured independent non-human item, was always inherently tied to the uncertain understanding of S_H (in itself arguably arbitrary). It allowed reality (the picture of the world) to be manipulated according to S_H's interests who could achieve canonization. There are many examples of forgeries in the Middle Ages who were accepted as authorities, sometimes playing a greater role than the authentic sources (Pelikan, 1987, p. 11). Major examples include: the *Donation by Pseudo-Constantine*; the *Decretals by Pseudo-Isidorus*; the *Corpus by Pseudo-Dionysius*; the *Hypomnesticon by Pseudo-Augustine*; *Cogitis me by Pseudo-Jerome* (Pelikan, pp. 11-12).

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[15] And as we will see even coming as far as reaching the truth value of 1 and becoming integrated in $\aleph\&\omega$

3. The pseudepigraph of Dionysius: a brief history of its *rezeption*

Corpus Areopagiticum[16] *(vel. Dionysiacum*[17]*)* is the name given by scholars to a collection of Greek texts ascribed to Dionysus the Areopagite, an obscure character mentioned *en passant* in *Acts 17:34*, as a spectator to Paul's discourse on the *unknown god* who converted afterwards (Rorem, p. 1) (Pelikan, p. 20). The writings however following the advent of humanism have come under significant scrutiny[18] [19] and after the beginning of the nineteenth century have been consistently post-dated[20] until at the end of it, have been dated by most scholars c. 500[21] almost five centuries after the events to which they purport to refer. As a consequence, it is considered as one of the most influential pseudepigraph within the Western history of ideas (Reale), their real author remains unknown and several hypotheses have been proposed as regards their identity.

The first documented use and appearance of the corpus is in c. 525-533[22] in a Syriac translation in Alexandria[23], as an authority invoked by some Monophysites led by Severus the bishop of Antioch (†538[24]) rejecting the outcome of the Council of Chalcedon of 451 (Pelikan, p. 12). We subsequently find the works employed also by Nestorians (Pelikan, pp. 13-14), until they came to be valued by the Orthodox too, through a character now known as Pseudo-Maximus the Confessor (in fact a John, bishop of Scythopolis c. 536-548[25]),who composed its first commentary with the goal to provide the correct reading, both because of its obscure style and associations with heresy (Pelikan, p. 15). But in defending their orthodoxy he too to promote his own theology (Chalcedonian) therefore incurring in claims of anachronism or prescience (Pelikan, p. 16).

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[16] (Rorem, 1987, p. 1)
[17] (Reale, 2009, p. 11)
[18] (Reale, p. 23)
[19] (Bellini, 2009, p. 38)
[20] (Bellini, 2009, p. 38)
[21] (Rorem, p. 1) (Bellini, 2009, p. 38)
[22] (Reale, p. 23) (Pelikan, p. 12) both mention year 532; (Bellini, 2009, p. 34) mentions a slightly wider interval *viz.* 532-533; (Mazzucchi, 2009, p. 731) mentions c. 525
[23] (Mazzucchi, 2009, p. 731)
[24] (Bellini, 2009, p. 38)
[25] (Mazzucchi, 2009, p. 733)

A further chapter in the history of the *Dionysius-Rezeption* is their westwards *migration*. It started with the first translation of the corpus into Latin by Hilduin c. 838 (Leclercq, p. 25), who additionally identified the author with the homonymous bishop martyr of Paris (Pelikan, p. 21). It was followed by a subsequent imperially commissioned translation by the philosopher John Scotus Eriugena in 862 (Leclercq, p. 26), then through a latter's homily showing Dionysian influences, whose excerpts where inserted in the *Sentences* in c. 1101, the corpus found its way into Peter Lombard's *ouvre* (Leclercq). Eventually, the pseudepigrapha captured the attention of major figures of thirteenth century scholasticism, with Grosseteste, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure each commenting and/or translating them (Leclercq, p. 29). From that time on Pseudo-Dionysius arguably reached their peak of recognition, so that for the purposes of this paper we won't proceed further in this brief history.

4. The Human Uncertainty Principle by Soros

Soros developed a *conceptual framework* with applications to social sciences challenging the doctrine of the unity of method established by Karl Popper (Soros, Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle, 2013, pp. 309-10). The said framework which his author names the *Human Uncertainty Principle (HUP)*[26] is made up of two propositions, namely the *principle of fallibility* and the *principle of reflexivity*:

4.1 Human Uncertainty Principle

     i.   **FALLIBILITY**. A human subject S_H can never have in principle a perfect picture of the world.

     i$_C$.[27] S_H's views are in principle imperfect: i.e. either biased, inconsistent or both.

     ii.   **REFLEXIVITY**. S_H's imperfect picture of the world can effectively shape the world.

(Soros, Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle, p. 310)

Since human subjects have to deal with an extremely complex world they elaborate various simplifying pictures of it viz. generalizations, dichotomies, moral precepts etc., these pictures however once created take on an existence of their own adding a further layer of complexity to the world (Soros, Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle, p. 311). Soros' further elucidates his principle (ii) by commenting that S_H's imperfect picture of the world (thought) serves two functions at the same time:

     a.   **(f_c)** Cognitive function

     b.   **(f_m)** Manipulative function

The first aims to understand the world, the second to influence the world. The twos connect S_H with the world in opposite directions and when operating at the same time they may deprive each of the independent variable, so that one becomes the dependent

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[26] To avoid confusion Soros states that the HUC is simply another more attractive term to denote reflexivity as a a universal human condition (Soros, 2003, p. 377).
[27] A consequence derived from i.

variable of the other, installing a circular relationship (Soros, Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle).

He explains further that while S_H through f_m can shape the world, the outcome will likely not correspond to S_H's intentions, as S_H's picture of the world acquired through f_c to inform his decisions was imperfect (Soros, Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle, p. 312).

> […] reflexive systems are dynamic and unfold over time as the cognitive and manipulative functions perpetually chase each other. Once time is introduced, reflexivity creates indeterminacy and uncertainty […]

Soros additionally argues that the reflexive feedback loop between f_m and f_c is continuous and recursive, S_H influences but do not the determine the world, the world influences but do not determine S_H, the loop can be caused by either a change of mind within S_H or a change in circumstances within the world (Soros, Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle, pp. 312-13).

4.2 Fertile fallacies: the operative merit of distorted views

Soros introduces the concept of *fertile fallacies*, which describe as distorted understandings of the world producing results reinforcing their distortion, starting an initially self-reinforcing but ultimately self-defeating process (Soros, 2010, p. 17). He identifies and discuss specifically two fertile fallacies, the Enlightenment and postmodern philosophies and concludes that misconceptions have exerted a pervasive influence on the way we look at the world (Soros, p. 18). Additionally, he characterizes fertile fallacies also as knowledge which proved useful in some area, but that was eventually unjustly extended beyond it, turning into a fallacy[28] (Soros, 2010, p. 17). Expanding on the place that fallacies occupy within human affairs, it declares flaws and misconceptions to play the same

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[28] Here he has in mind in particular what he denotes as the Enlightenment fallacy, the claim that the methods of natural sciences could apply to social sciences too, simply because they produced results within physics. (Soros, 2010)

role as mutation in biology, with the difference that instead of genes, ideas and behavior patterns are propagated[29] (Soros, 2003, p. 28).

> I often espoused views that I knew to be distorted for the sake of their operational success […]

Apart from simply biased or inaccurate views which may somehow produce positive outcomes, Soros also contends that intentional deceptions may be successful[30] and even more successful in comparison to critically obtained pictures[31] (Soros, p. 26). In fact, he extend his argument by claiming that in the purpose of influencing the world a critical mode of thinking[32] may be an impediment, as humans by nature dislike to listen when they are wrong[33]. Additionally, he claims that people are prone to follow leaders who claim to know without hesitations, so that a leader confessing their mistakes[34] or doubts won't be a leader for long, concluding that this could be an explanation as for why markets are more efficient than politics (Soros, p. 26).

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[29] This idea reminds the notable concept of *meme* developed by Richard Dawkins. Soros defends the originality and worth of his idea arguing that at the time of the publication, evolutionary game theory was far less advanced and that they still need a novel philosophical foundation (Soros, 2003, p. 29)

[30] Machiavelli notably espoused a similar argument (Machiavelli, 1961, p. 65): "Né mai a uno principe mancorono cagioni legittime di colorare la inosservanzia. Di questo se ne potrebbe dare infiniti esempli moderni e monstrare quante pace, quante promesse sono state fatte irrite e vane per la infedelità de' principi: e quello che ha saputo meglio usare la golpe, è meglio capitato. **Ma è necessario questa natura saperla bene colorire, et essere gran simulatore e dissimulatore: e sono tanto semplici li uomini, e tanto obediscano alle necessità presenti, che colui che inganna troverrà sempre chi si lascerà ingannare**."

[31] Indeed phenomena such e.g. *fake news*, *conspiracy theories* and pseudo-scientific alternative medicine demonstrate that this can be the case.

[32] Soros associated in his unpublished essay *The Burden of Consciousness* a critical mode of thinking reflexively with a Popperian open society (Soros),

[33] Phenomenon illustrated by the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance (Gabrieli, 2011, p. 737).

[34] One law of power (law 26) by Robert Greene in an influential book in leadership advises that "You must seem a paragon of civility and efficiency: Your hands are never soiled by mistakes and nasty deeds. Maintain such a spotless appearance by using others as scapegoats and cat's-paws to disguise your involvement." (Greene, 2000)

He declares then that one of the insights of his conceptual framework is that success and truth are two separate concepts[35] and that our current American-influenced society worships success fueling the umpteenth fertile fallacy (Soros). Indeed, he asserts that a false explanation $\neg P$ can be more appealing to S_{H1} than an understanding of P to S_{H2}. Finally, he shares the concrete example of two theories which he additionally denotes as fertile fallacies: the efficient market hypothesis makes possible for economics to claim the status of a hard science and market fundamentalism at the same time allows for the successful financiers to claim to serve the common interest (Soros, 2013, p. 320).

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[35] This philosophical view clashes both with Nietzsche's influenced theories such post-modernism and American pragmatism both of which are the subject of Soros' critique, yet as fertile fallacies they reveal a *valuable kernel of truth* (Soros, 2010, p. 10).

5. Applying the Human Uncertainty Principle to explain the *Dionysius-Rezeption*

As I have shown in ([§ Sec. 2](#)) medieval epistemology generated a paradox which facilitated the spread of fallacies, even of an intentionally deceptive nature. We took as a case example the corpus of Pseudo-Dionysius, a philosophical work expounding a complex metaphysical theory based on fundamental concepts such as hierarchy, deification, unknowing (agnosis) and luminous darkness. Pseudo-Dionysius' theory ($T\pi$) was mainly construed upon Neoplatonism and especially Proclus' own version of it (Reale, 2009, pp. 16-19), but by simply claiming to not contradict א&ω their were able to successfully promote it in the Christian world. Indeed, Beierwaltes argues that $T\pi$ qualifies as the most extreme example of a Hellenization of Christianity (Reale) and Mazzucchi even believes Pseudo-Dionysius to have been a Pagan philosopher with the intention to radically alter the Christian religion (Mazzucchi, 2009, pp. 711-762). As for the latter being just an hypothesis, by utilizing my own picture of the paradox inherent in medieval epistemology, I can derive that it definitely allowed at least on principle for actors maliciously inclined to have their T validated.

Whoever Pseudo-Dionysius was (or were) we know that they promoted a version of Neoplatonism claiming through exegesis ([§ Sec. 2](#)) to reflect א&ω, that they lied about their identity claiming to represent ω and that the latter claim was the decisive reason as for why $T\pi$ was verified. In fact we could argue that wasn't it for the pseudonymity the author's view would have just be entirely forgotten, instead through an intentionally deceptive claim Pseudo-Dionysius not only achieved fame but caused historical change, concretely shaping the world.

History and in particular medieval history shows how deceptive theories (pseudonymous works) can be more successful than non-deceptive theories (the authentic works)[36]. Pseudo-Dionysius without their deception would hardly have achieved their success, his "canonization" by authors such as Thomas Aquinas and their consequent influence on figures such as Dante, Eckhart, Cusanus, John of the Cross up until contemporary

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[36] (Pelikan, 1987, p. 11)

phenomenologists (i.e. Stein, Marion)[37] is the direct result of their claim to represent ω, that is be an authoritative Church father heir to the Apostles. If we were to conclude that despite the deception (the means) the message promoted by $T\pi$ (the end) was by itself valuable we would justify pious frauds and paraphrasing Machiavelli contend that *the end justifies the means*[38] this introduces an ethical dilemma but we will not discuss it here, as it transcends the purposes of the paper.

By applying HUP we can explain the mechanism behind the *Dionysius-Rezeption* as an historical process. We determine the *Corpus Areopagiticum* to be a fertile fallacy initiated by the obtaining of self-reinforcing results which set into motion a self-reinforcing but ultimately self-defeating process. If we examine closely the brief history we presented of the *Dionysius-Rezeption* (§ Sec. 3), we will see that it was set into motion and incrementally alimented by people who validated it through their authority. First by (he who was believed to be) Maximus the Confessor, subsequently by the imperial office until it reached its peak of validation among the most influential Scholastic philosophers. After that from the Renaissance onwards the process initiated a slow decline culminating in its ultimate dismissal in the eighteenth century.

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[37] For the corroborated influence of Pseudo-Dionysius Cf. (Leclercq, 1987, pp. 23-32) as well exclusively on Dante Cf. (Bellini, 2009, p. 43) and Stein (Speer & Regh (Hg.), 2016)
[38] Popularly paraphrased from "[…] e nelle azioni di tutti li uomini, e massime de' principi, dove non è iudizio da reclamare, si guarda al fine. Facci dunque uno principe di vincere e mantenere lo stato: e' mezzi saranno sempre iudicati onorevoli, e da ciascuno laudati" […] (Machiavelli, 1961, p. 66)

6. Conclusion

We can conclude from one part that fallacies cannot last forever and that sooner or later they will be proven wrong, even if it that may take up to 1200 years[39]! From the other that fallacies, especially of a deceptive nature serve the interests of S_H that is the f_m, as the examples given in (§ Sec. 4: 4.2) shows and as Pelikan eloquently illustrates:

> […] pseudonymity usually succeeds only if it manages to set down on paper what everyone—or at least the "right people"—will recognize as commonly received truth.
>
> (Pelikan, 1987, p. 22)

Pseudo-Dionysius was successfully able to shape the world through their fallacy and initiate an historical process, this fallacy kept being validated as it produced results, among these results we can cite i.e. the legitimation it provided to the power of the church. The already mentioned fundamental concept of *hierarchy* when believed true allowed to justify Papal theocratical universal claims (Leclercq, pp. 30-31).

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[39] But this length of time was clearly as I argue the result of the flaws inherent within medieval epistemology, indeed the corpus was definitely dismissed only after a new epistemic paradigm took ground.

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8. Declaration of academic integrity

I hereby confirm that the present paper

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is the result of my own independent scholarly work, and that in all cases material from the work of others (in books, articles, essays, dissertations, and on the internet) is acknowledged, and quotations and paraphrases are clearly indicated. No material other than that listed has been used. I have read and understood the Institute's regulations and procedures concerning plagiarism.

Ivan Catanzaro, 31/03/2025